

[PRAYER] Well, it's been so wonderful to see everyone joining us for worship, bringing their children, joining us for Bible studies, engaging in mission and outreach, and breathing life into this church. We are truly blessed to have one another in this place, and blessed to have so much to be grateful for. Each of us faces challenges, many of us major challenges, but one thing is for sure: we are all here to draw close to God's blessings. There is no substitute for being together as the body of Christ, and no substitute for learning how to be Christ in the world together. We are not just a room full of people: we are disciples of Christ, learning how to be a people of God, a day at a time.

A people. To be a people means that we are forged together into something more than the sum of our individual lives. You know the old game that we play with little children. Let's say it together: "This is the church, this is its steeple; open the door and see all the people!" All of those fingers are knitted together as the church. We all need one another to move forward as a people known as South Meriden Trinity United Methodist Church. We move together as one, each with our place in the group, but as a part of something that's knitted together as one piece.

To move as a church is not always easy. Sometimes, those fingers don't fit together so comfortably. Especially in today's world, people are used to doing their own thing. We talked last week about the joy of God in our faith life being more than a "Happy Meal," an easily purchased product that you can pick up at a convenient store. This week, I'd like us to look at how God's joy takes us on a journey towards some uncomfortable moments, moments that tempt us go back to the way things were, and not move forward; moments when we're not so certain that faith is really worth the risk of seeking God's joy together.

We all know those moments of risk, the ones where we're out on the edge of a diving board, or behind a curtain that's about to open, or at the back of an aisle that we're about to walk down, or at the entrance of a hospital, a school, an office building, or a house, knowing that our lives will change forever once we go through that door. The future in those moments can seem so uncertain, so daunting, so huge compared to the smallness of our own lives. We know that we're promised something good in the future, but walking towards it, actually moving out of our comfort zone to reach it, challenges our faith.

And we're not alone in that challenge. [HURRICANE DAMAGE] Think of the people in the Caribbean, in Florida, in Texas and Louisiana, who have been hit so hard by our recent hurricanes. Many are looking at everything that they have ever had in their lives being destroyed. And yet, for these people, and for us, there's only one way to go: forward, forward into a future that God has offered us in hope, by being God's people, together. [BLANK]

In our reading today from Exodus, we find another group of people who felt trapped between a past when they had to endure oppression, and a future that seemed to have nothing but new enemies ahead. And in that moment, they are invited to have faith in God's providence, God's willingness to show a way forward that they hadn't seen

before. [SATELLITE VIEW] If we follow the geography of this story in Exodus, it leads us to a place far from the land of Goshen, where the Israelites had lived in slavery under Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. It was about as far as they could get from where they wanted to be! [BLANK]

Why did God take Israel so far out of the way to get to where God was leading them? Well, if we read the chapter before today's reading, we discover that God knew that the Israelites would flee back to Egypt if they took the shortest path, the path that would lead them to hostile enemies. And God could see that even as the people of Israel were fleeing, they were wondering if it wouldn't be better to go back to Egypt, and live in the certainty of slavery, rather than to face their future in God's hands. It turns out that Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh on Passover was the beginning of a journey towards them learning to become God's people in their hearts.

So the people of Israel found themselves stuck, in the middle of nowhere, with the army of Pharaoh behind them, blocked by the ocean, and a mountainous island beyond the water, [BAAL STATUE] where people worshiped Baal-Zephon, a pagan storm god of the Canaanites. They were surrounded by choices about who they would be: would they bow to the gods of Canaan, and lose their identity as God's people? [EGYPT GOD] Would they turn away from God's path, and return to slavery under the Gods of Egypt? [BLOOD LINTEL] Or would they follow Moses, the repentant sinner, who God had called to lead them, and trust in the Passover promises of deliverance that God had offered them? [PILLAR OF FIRE]

A pillar of cloud and fire, God's powerful presence on earth, separated Israel from the Egyptian army. God's presence certainly frightened the Egyptians, but it also encouraged Israel to know that the power of God would not allow them to backslide into the weakness of slavery! That wasn't God's way. No, there was another way: God's way. [CHARLTON HESTON]

What happened next has been shown in many movies, movies that make God's miracles look like special effects, for the sake of a two-hour film. But the people of Florida know that God's power is not special effects. [TAMPA BAY SLIDE] You may have seen photos and videos of Tampa Bay during Hurricane Irma, when the force of Irma's winds sucked up so much water that the bay was drained, and people could walk on it for a couple of hours, before the waters came rushing back. God doesn't need special effects: God just needs teachable moments, moments when we can understand what the grace of God's providence is all about! [BLANK SLIDE]

And so it was that Moses pointed his staff towards the water, where God had told him to point it. God pointed Moses and the Israelites towards their teachable moment: this way! The real God of storms, the God of heaven and earth, made a way forward for them, where none had ever existed before. A mighty wind drew away the waters, and, for a brief time, a moment of providence, they were able to walk across the silty bottom of an inlet to get to dry land on the other side. In a moment of doom, they walked away from a past of slavery, right past the gods who might enslave them in the future, and found

freedom and peace through their trust in God, in God's moment of providence.

And when they were safe and sound on the other side, their enemies defeated, they were in awe of their God of deliverance, a God who gave them a way forward through all that they had feared. God had said, "This way!" And God was right, beyond all that they could imagine.

All of us face those moments of looking at the waters, enemies behind us, and a path ahead of us that seems to lead nowhere. All of us have those moments when deliverance seems like the least possible thing. In those moments, please remember this: God has a path of providence ready for us to follow, a path that leads to healing, peace, and hope. It is a path that requires us to trust in what God wants to protect us from, our old ways of doing things that got us nowhere but into a sense of futile slavery to sin and death. It is a path that requires us to look past the gods of this world that want to dictate our future to us, and to look at a peaceful shoreline that God has promised us through faith. It is a path that requires us to find the discipline to act as a people, and not just a group of individuals, and to build a community that fosters and encourages the presence of God's grace in our lives. It is a path that requires us to listen to people through whom God is speaking, including ourselves, and to hear that still, small, fearless, and powerful voice within us, that says, much to our surprise: "This way!"

God knows the way. We only have to listen to find it. I am grateful for the times when God has graced my life with that voice of grace that has led me towards God's providence. When I was baptised, when the waters flowed over my head, God called to me and said, "This way!" When my life was in turmoil, and I sought God's comfort in the Bible, God called to me and said, "This way!" When I stood up in a field one night as a counselor at a Methodist summer camp, and said words that had never come from my mouth before, words that burned with a passion for ministry that was more than who I was, God called to me and said, "This way!" When I saw that my path to ministry would be long, and hard, and filled with much wandering in the desert, God called to me, again, and again, and said, "This way!" When I looked at an application for divinity school, forty years after I had started my journey into ministry, and considered the ocean of challenges ahead of me, God called to me and said, "This way!" And when our District Superintendent called me in the middle of my exam week to tell me about a church in South Meriden, God called to both you and me, and said, "This way!"

God knows the way. We have only to listen to God together to find it. We are on a journey together, a journey of faith, a journey of life, a journey of hope, a journey of growth, a journey that leads to joy, comfort, world-conquering strength, and everlasting peace, as God leads us towards becoming a people of God. It's right this way. This way. The way of God. Amen.